

ARSENE WENGER

THE INSIDE STORY OF
ARSENAL UNDER WENGER

John Cross



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Football is a comfort, even through the hard times in life.

~~My dad introduced me to football, Arsenal and the love of the game.~~

When Arsenal were losing the FA Cup final 2-0 to Hull in May 2014, I could almost hear my dad – who passed away just two days earlier – look down in exasperation and say: ‘Can’t you do this for me just this once?’

Of course, Arsenal did it for him. And the magical part about Arsene Wenger is that he has done it so many times for so many people.

I couldn’t have done this book without the support of my family. I would like to dedicate it to my dad. I miss talking to him so very much.

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INTRODUCTION

ARSENE WENGER IS HARDLY a run-of-the-mill football manager – and the Frenchman is proud to be different.

As if to prove it, on Monday, 1 September 2014, Wenger flew with agent Leon Angel to Rome for a charity football match. While the rest of football was glued to a television or watching transfer deadline day unfold on television, Wenger went to the Vatican to meet Pope Francis.

Arsenal chief executive Ivan Gazidis was desperately trying to complete a deal to sign Danny Welbeck from Manchester United. Gazidis was struggling to get hold of his manager on the phone and eventually he got through to Angel, only to be told that Wenger was talking to the Pope. Later in the day, the Welbeck deal was completed and Wenger got his man. But it just goes to show this is no ordinary football manager.

Wenger does not like getting drawn into transfer auctions. He attended a convention in Geneva while Arsenal went on their crazy supermarket sweep on deadline day in 2011 and that perhaps illustrates where his priorities lie. He plays by his own rules, is determined to win with style, would rather shun the money-mad transfer market and yet always ensures that he and his own players get very well paid.

Wenger breezed into Arsenal, the most English of football clubs in 1996, as a relative unknown but soon established himself as a genius, a football revolutionary. The beautiful style of his teams, combined with his charm and unexpected wit, was destined to make him one of the Premier League's all-time greats and the most successful manager in Arsenal's long and illustrious history.

When Wenger arrived, Manchester United were reigning champions, Newcastle their closest challengers. Arsenal had finished fifth the season before under Bruce Rioch and Wenger's greatest achievement over the next two decades was to bring trophies and a consistency that would ensure standards would never drop as low again.

Wenger delivered a style of football and quality of player which had rarely been seen at Arsenal before. He introduced new training methods, new diets and mastered the French transfer market. His brilliant one-liners ensured he made the headlines, and his jousting with Manchester United boss Sir Alex Ferguson – both on and off the pitch – established one of English football's great rivalries.

But, just at the time Arsenal were breaking records and enjoying the most successful period in the club's history, they were hit with a double whammy which would push the club to the brink and test Wenger's management skills to their very limit.

Roman Abramovich's Russian revolution bankrolled Chelsea from 2003, while Manchester City's new-found wealth also emerged as a major factor in the Premier League, just at a time when Arsenal were having to borrow heavily to move to the Emirates Stadium. Wenger was left fighting with both hands tied behind his back – and yet continued to deliver Champions League places every year, challenged for the title and, by 2015, had emerged out the other side, winning back-to-back FA Cups to become the first post-war manager to win the trophy six times.

Wenger still does not like spending 'stratospheric' money, as he calls it, but two world-class signings in Mesut Ozil and Alexis Sanchez have helped change Arsenal's dynamic, ambition and

outlook.

Perhaps more than any other recent big game, Wenger was able to bring it all together in the 2015 FA Cup final when they beat Aston Villa 4-0. The mixture of pace, power and movement showed Arsenal at their best. They had struggled under the pressure of expectation, the slow, heavy Wembley pitch and being favourites in previous games against Wigan, Hull and Reading. But here, finally, was what Arsenal were about under Wenger.

Ozil glided across the pitch, Sanchez revelled in the big-match occasion, Santi Cazorla orchestrated the play, while Theo Walcott's pace stretched Aston Villa's defence to its limit. Arsenal didn't just win, they won with style, which is so important to Wenger. There is always a debate in football about whether it really matters how you win – just as long as you win. Pragmatists such as Jose Mourinho or Rafa Benitez put winning before everything and, when they are lifting trophies, that seems to be all that matters. But Wenger believes it goes deeper than that and, talking in May 2015, he gave a fascinating insight into why he believes it is important to entertain as well as win.

'Let's not forget you can win and lose playing with different styles,' said Wenger. 'I believe the big clubs have a responsibility to win – but to also win with style. I believe our sport has moved forward a lot on the physical side, tactical side but we must not forget the values that it carries through the generations. One of them is the vibe coming out of the team going into the stand doesn't lie.'

'I always like to think that the guy who wakes up in the morning after a hard week of work has that moment, that fraction of a second, when he opens his eyes and says: "Oh, today I go to watch my team." I like to think it makes him happy, he thinks he can maybe see something special. We can't guarantee that, but we have to try . . . It's amazing the effect you can have on people's lives.'

That seemed to come together again in 2015. There have been many highs and some lows during Wenger's reign at Arsenal. The Premier League and FA Cup Doubles in 1998 and 2002, followed by the history-making Invincibles season in 2003/04 when they won the title unbeaten, were some of the best moments.

After that, however, Wenger became as much accountant as football manager during the move to the Emirates but, through all the disappointments and frustrations of the years that followed, he kept the vision of a glorious sunny day in May as the inspiration through the dark times.

His philosophy may frustrate some – indeed, it often annoys and upsets his own players. But Wenger sets up to attack and win; he rarely goes into games to defend and stop the opposition. When Arsenal lose, it looks naive and foolish, and he rightly gets criticised. But when Arsenal win, Wenger gets the plaudits. And when they play the beautiful game and win, Wenger gets hailed as a genius.

Over the last two decades Wenger has, without question, revolutionised Arsenal, changed the face of English football and established himself as one of the biggest characters in the Premier League. He provokes strong opinions, but that's the life of a football manager. It's an unforgiving profession where sometimes even your own fans don't appreciate you.

But that only goes to prove why Arsene Wenger's career in English football has been a fascinating ride right from the start. There has always been drama, entertainment, success and disappointment.

What follows tries to get to the heart of his achievement and assesses his methods. Based on detailed insight from players, backroom staff and the boardroom, as well as many years reporting on the club and following its every move, it places his remarkable story at the heart of the football revolution.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

TO UNDERSTAND THE JOB Arsene Wenger has done, you first need to understand the club he was walking into back in 1996. And only then can you begin to appreciate the scale of his achievement and the transformation he has made.

In 1996, Arsenal was a club resistant to change despite having been rocked by a string of scandals, from bungs to a destructive drinking culture and a dressing-room revolt. It was a club steeped in tradition, with Highbury's Marble Halls a reminder of the past, but also perhaps a symbol of why the club could not go forward. With a capacity of around 38,000, the stadium's listed buildings were subject to restrictions in terms of improvements and expansion. And in the boardroom, which lived up to the Old Etonian stereotype, port and cigars were the order of the day. It was a club known as the Bank of England. That was the nickname given to Arsenal in the 1930s because it had wealthy ownership, broke transfer records and gave big contracts. The Bank of England tag stuck into the 1990s, not because of the club's big expenditure but more because of tradition, being old school and very British.

Appointing a foreign manager in those days was still a rarity. Perhaps surprisingly, the first foreign manager in English football's top flight did not arrive until Dr Jozef Venglos took over at Aston Villa in 1990. The Czech manager lasted a year. His appointment was seen as the exception to the rule, a bold and brave move that didn't work. That perhaps explains why Arsenal actually rejected the chance to appoint Wenger in 1995.

Arsenal were looking for a new manager after one of the most turbulent periods in the club's history. George Graham, a member of Arsenal's 1971 Double-winning team, was sacked in February 1995 after a bung scandal, following revelations that he had taken unsolicited payments on transfers. Graham had won two league titles, cups and brought back success to Arsenal. But his nine-year reign ended in disgrace and finished with a team in decline, a difficult dressing room run by egos, and a squad used to playing dull football which had revelled in the fans' chant: 'One-nil to the Arsenal.'

But the fans gradually fell out of love with Graham's cautious approach, which proves that success is not always enough. Arsenal needed a change, a different direction and new hope. The one member of the board who enjoyed being seen as different, a revolutionary, a mover and shaker in European football's corridors of power, was their vice-chairman David Dein. And the first meeting between Wenger and Dein – who remain as close as ever – tells you everything you need to know about Arsenal's history and traditions. Little did they realise then, but 2 January 1989 was to become a pivotal date in the history of Arsenal Football Club.

Wenger, then manager of Monaco, was at Arsenal to watch a game during a break in the fixtures in France. He had stopped off in London after a match in Turkey. An agent, Dennis Roach, had got him a ticket in the directors' box to see Arsenal take on Tottenham in the north London derby. Arsenal beat Spurs 2-0 and went on to win the title that season. Amusingly, the main thing that sticks in Wenger's

mind about that game was the appearance of Arsenal's ginger-haired substitute. Perry Groves can be proud that he made such an impression on Wenger, even if it was more to do with the colour of his hair. Dein recalls:

[Arsene] was passing through London and stopped off to see a game at the old Highbury stadium. We had a boardroom, which on match day was the domain of the directors and their privileged guests, and next door was the cocktail lounge, which hosted managers, scouts and generally football people from within the game.

Since, in those days, women had limited access to the boardroom – that soon changed! – my wife and one of her friends camped the cocktail lounge. She managed to get word to me that the manager of Monaco was there. At half-time, I introduced myself to this elegant man, wearing a long trench coat and what looked like bad National Health glasses. He really didn't look a typical football manager.

I asked him how long he would be staying in London and he said: 'Overnight.' I then asked him what he was doing that evening. He said: 'Nothing.' One of my favourite sayings is the motto of the turtle: 'You never get anywhere unless you stick your neck out.' I then enquired whether he would like to join my wife and me at a friend's house for dinner. The answer changed our lives and I guess the lives of every Arsenal supporter. 'Yes, I'd like that,' he replied.

Wenger stayed the night at their house in Totteridge, having been persuaded to go along to a small party being hosted by Dein's friend Alan Whitehead, who played drums in the 1970s pop group Marmalade. They had an evening of buffet food, small talk and rounded it off with a game of charades. Dein continues:

Arsene didn't speak English that fluently at the time, which was just as well since it's a mime game! Within a few minutes he had the courage to act out *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. I thought to myself that he was not the usual football manager, an ex-player who had left school at 16. Arsene spoke four languages, went to Strasbourg University and had a degree in economics.

During the evening I saw this vision written in the sky: 'Arsene for Arsenal!' It's destiny, it's fate, it's going to happen. Of course at the time, George Graham was our manager and we were about to win the league at that unforgettable game at Anfield. But Arsene and I became good friends, and from time to time I would go to Monaco to watch their matches. I could see how he interacted with the players, the press, the supporters and his board. He didn't realise that he was auditioning for Arsenal.

That fateful meeting changed everything, and over the course of the next few years they cemented their friendship: Dein would courier a video tape of Arsenal's latest game to Wenger and they would talk, as friends, and analyse every performance. So when the Arsenal job became available in 1995, there was only ever one man as far as Dein was concerned. But, although Dein was hugely influential on transfers and the running of the club day-to-day, the rest of the board ignored his advice.

Arsenal chairman Peter Hill-Wood met Wenger in his favourite Italian restaurant, Ziani's, just off the King's Road in London. Hill-Wood recalls being impressed with Wenger, but had major concerns about him largely because he was foreign. 'I actually had cold feet about employing a foreigner at the time,' Hill-Wood said. 'Because we had a tricky squad, and one or two of them had personal problems, I wasn't too sure he would understand it. I liked him immediately. I was just nervous, and I think some of my colleagues were as well, whether we were ready for a French coach. We decided we weren't ready for it. We had a fairly difficult team. I was wrong, of course.'

Hill-Wood was later forced to admit that the man they eventually went for, Bruce Rioch, who left Bolton to take over at Arsenal, was 'not up to the job really'. But ironically – given the board's reservations about Wenger – the players were very mixed about him. Dennis Bergkamp was signed during Rioch's reign and the Dutchman speaks fondly of him, even expressing sadness that he left. And Martin Keown credits him for helping him start to become more expansive as a player.

But Rioch struggled with other big names and characters. The players used to laugh at him, particularly his habit of never wearing a belt on his trousers. Little things often amuse players, and if a bit of mickey-taking over not wearing a belt was all Rioch had to worry about then he would have been fine. But perhaps his biggest clash of personalities came with Ian Wright, the Arsenal fans' favourite and leading goalscorer. Their relationship hit such a low point that the striker put in a

transfer request after getting fed up with either being played on the left wing or being dropped to the bench.

Just before the start of the 1996/97 season, growing unrest in the dressing room plus a dispute over transfer funds brought about the demise of Rioch. So, in the space of 18 months, Arsenal, a club renowned for stability and caution, had sacked a manager amid a scandal, sacked another after dressing-room problems and were suddenly thinking about bucking the trend by going for a relatively unknown Frenchman.

These were the days before social media, before foreign managers were well known on these shores and no one was championing Wenger's cause – apart from Dein. Since their meeting back in 1989, Wenger's career had suffered highs and lows, which left him questioning his very future in the game. He had managed Monaco between 1987 and 1994, but had constantly become frustrated, repeatedly finishing second best to Marseille. The frustration came in the shape of Marseille's match-fixing scandal. He felt cheated by Bernard Tapie, the Marseille president, and his attempts to bribe opposing players, officials and the game's rulers. Marseille reached the 1993 European Cup final against Milan and only a few days before that needed to beat Valenciennes to win the French league title.

Wenger is still angry about it and, when match fixing became newsworthy again in 2013 after allegations of a plot involving non-league and lower divisions shocked English football, Wenger revisited the subject in an emotionally charged press conference. It would be wrong to say he was happy to talk about it, but he was eager to speak up in order to make his point and try to stop it happening again.

'It was one of the most difficult periods of my life,' said Wenger. No wonder. Wenger was carving out a successful career in France, and feels wronged by the Marseille scandal. He still wonders what might have been had they all been on a level playing field.

Monaco had Mark Hateley, Jurgen Klinsmann and Glenn Hoddle. Wenger had recruited George Weah and, with all the hallmarks of his management mantra, was on the way to turning the Liberian striker into one of the best players in the world. When Weah later retired and swapped football for politics, a Liberian journalist came to one of Wenger's press conferences. He nervously asked Wenger whether he knew Weah was running for office. Wenger responded with an in-depth answer which almost became a lecture on the state of Liberia and the country's politics. Did he know? Of course. Wenger remains loyal to his players even after they leave him.

Wenger also made a lasting impression on German World Cup winner Klinsmann, who has achieved so much in the game as a player and a coach but says he owes much to those days playing under Wenger at Monaco. His admiration for his former coach is obvious:

I think every player can only learn so much from his managers, and I was so lucky. I had Arsene, Trapattoni, Beckenbauer, Ossie Ardiles, Gerry Francis, Cesar Luis Menotti. If I look back, I had many teachers and they taught me so many things off the field as well, not only the soccer stuff. Wenger was already a legend at Monaco; he'd stayed there for more than seven years, and he went off real quick to Japan and since then he's here [Arsenal]. But he's not only the football coach, who helps you to put the pieces together on the field; he is such a wealth of knowledge off the field that for a player it is like going to the best university in the world.

There are lots of little examples that you never forget because they catch up with you later on. With Arsene it was always the long term picture on players. We had a very talented Monaco team; we reached the semi-finals of the Champions League and lost to AC Milan. He left players out that I thought needed to play in order for us to have a chance. One of the big names was Youri Djorkaeff at the time he was a young player. He said: 'No, he has to learn to live the right life off the field.' It paid off. The kid learned his lesson and a couple of years later won the World Cup with France.

There I understood his vision was always long term. Yes, he knew he had to provide results short term. But it was more than that. It was how should this player be in two, four and six years from now. He saw that already, he saw it in Djorkaeff, in Thuram, in Pet

Wenger was clearly a deep thinker right from the start of his managerial career. That's one of the reasons why being cheated in the Marseille bribery scandal hurt so much. Four Valenciennes players were offered 250,000 French francs each (roughly £30,000) to 'take their foot off the gas' in their

game with Marseille. The players turned whistle-blowers, French football was rocked by the scandal and suddenly Marseille's success – Monaco had finished runners-up in each of the previous two seasons – was called into question. We will never know whether the bribes won Marseille their trophies. Wenger recalls:

You hear rumours and after that you cannot come out in the press and say: 'This game was not regular.' You must prove what you say. From knowing something, feeling that it is true, coming out publicly and saying, 'Look, I can prove it' is the most difficult. There are little incidents added one to the other. In the end, there is no coincidence.

It is a shame. Once you don't know any more if everyone is genuine out there, that is something absolutely disastrous. I think we have absolutely to fight against that with the strongest severity to get that out of the game. It was a period where European football was not clean, for different reasons, but I hope we have that behind us.

Look, you know what it is when you're in a job like mine. You worry about every detail, about who to pick for the next game, to prepare the next game, and when you go to the game you know all that is useless, it's of course a disaster.

I didn't feel like walking away [from the game] because even when it was happening in France or in Europe, I always felt that in the end the game will come clean again and the love for the game from everybody will take over.

But out of the Marseille scandal one unbreakable bond was formed. Boro Primorac was the coach at Valenciennes and he stood up for what he believed in. He gave evidence at the resulting trial in 1994 and was promptly ostracised by those in the sport in his country. French football did not enjoy having its dirty linen washed in public.

Wenger said of Primorac: 'He did very well because it's not always the fact that you stand up against it, it's the consequences of it after. I can tell you that story one day and you will be surprised. Wenger enjoys dropping nuggets like this into conversations and press conferences. Rarely does he go back and complete the story, however. But what followed was a move to Japan – and he took Primorac with him.

It has been a strange career for Wenger, whose upbringing was in many ways unconventional. He was born in Strasbourg in October 1949 to parents Alphonse and Louise Wenger. Strasbourg is the capital and principal city of the Alsace region of eastern France, close to the border with Germany, and is effectively a bridge between the two countries. The family owned a bistro and a car spare parts business. Despite his nationality, he did not speak French fluently until he was about seven. And instead of watching football matches in his homeland, Wenger was taken across the border to games in Germany. He recounts fond memories of crowding round an old black-and-white TV screen to watch matches, falling further in love with the game after the classic 1960 European Cup final when Real Madrid beat Eintracht Frankfurt 7-3.

Early memories of English football were formed when he began watching FA Cup finals. 'It was a dream when I was a kid to watch the FA Cup,' recalls Wenger. 'It was one of the competitions you could watch in black and white on television . . . What stays in my memory is exactly the place where I sat at school, because we had to pay one franc to watch. What struck me at the time was the ball was white and the pitch was perfect, because I played in a village where the pitch was a disaster. The ball was white and small and the pitch was absolutely immaculate. And the players had their hair well-combed, and the managers were relaxed at that time – they joked together on the bench. That always struck me.'

It is fascinating to think that, even back then, Wenger was looking at the body language and behaviour of the managers.

However, the first team he supported was probably Borussia Monchengladbach, the side he followed on those trips to games in Germany. The excitement was increased by regular chats in the family bistro, which he rather fondly now describes as a pub, showing just how much he has embraced English culture. 'There is no better psychological education than growing up in a pub when you are

five or six because you meet all different people and hear how cruel they can be. You hear the way they talk to each other like saying, “You’re a liar.” And from an early age you get a practical — psychological education into the minds of people.’

By his own admission, Wenger was a pretty average professional footballer. A gangly defender, he worked his way up with amateur teams, lower divisions and then reached the pinnacle of his playing career with RC Strasbourg. He did not make his professional debut until he was 29; he made only 13 appearances for them, but did play in the UEFA Cup, and made two appearances when they won the title in 1979. However, Wenger’s playing career is rarely remembered.

Wenger does, however, recall that he always wanted to work in England. ‘The first time I came to England was when I was 29 years old; it was during the summer to learn English at Cambridge University, during the football holidays. I didn’t want to die without learning English as I felt that I always wanted to have an international life and I thought that it would be impossible without speaking English.’

Even then, he showed a fascination and determination to coach which led to him becoming youth-team manager. From there, he became assistant manager at Cannes, then moved to Nancy where he was relegated and yet still gained admiring glances from Monaco.

Wenger does, however, remember those early days were incredibly stressful – even prompting him to be physically sick after games because of the tension. ‘I started at 33 as a manager and sometimes felt I wouldn’t survive. Physically, I was sick.’ Those who know him now say that, while he no longer throws up, his moods are just as bleak after defeats.

Relative success in those early days at Monaco turned to bitterness and, at the end of 1994, he joined Grampus Eight in Japan, taking Primorac with him. It was a new challenge intended to re-energise him, and yet initially it proved to be very difficult.

Wenger has an obvious affection for the Japanese people, often engaging them at press conference asking them which part of the country they are from. Despite this, Wenger didn’t return to Nagoya until the summer of 2014, when Arsenal visited as part of their pre-season tour. There was an emotional reunion with his translator, who’d been on hand in 1995 when the club’s owner demanded to see Wenger following his bad start. ‘Come on, Boro, pack your bags,’ Wenger said to his loyal assistant.

Wenger went in expecting the worst, and came out with a vote of confidence which was rewarded with one of the best spells in the club’s history: they won two cups, were runners-up in the J League, and the Frenchman was voted Manager of the Year.

Wenger has very fond memories of his time in Japan – especially as the drastic change seemed to take his mind away from the match-fixing scandal that had severely damaged French football and Wenger’s faith in the game in France. He comments:

I had already coached for ten years in a top league in France. It was at the stage of my life where it is important, because to be confronted with a completely different culture was something that I think helped me a lot. As well, to be at the start of an experience like Japan was a very good experience because Nagoya was a very young club but a very professional club already at that time.

They were very well organised and for me to experience that people give their best, which they do in Japan every day, was a very positive experience that I brought back to Europe. I could . . . be confronted with a completely different culture in my job. That is fantastic. Not many jobs allow you to go to Japan and continue to do your job. That was something that is unique for me.

Japan seemed to reinvigorate Wenger and, in a rather understated way, seemed to help shape the way he is today. His experience there, the adulation of the fans, helped him realise the importance of embracing the culture of the country you are in, thus preparing him for his transformation into an adopted Englishman.

There is no doubt that his early days at Arsenal were a test. Wenger was a world away from what

the players were used to. The board also. But the Arsenal hierarchy realised their mistake from a year previously and revisited their attempts to hire him. The similarity of his first name to that of the club must surely be a sign – a bit like the once-a-year punter taking a gamble on a horse's name in the Grand National, surely they could see that Arsene was the man for Arsenal?

But, of course, his name was not known in England, despite his record at Monaco. It's become an urban myth that the London *Evening Standard* carried a headline of 'Arsene Who?' to greet Wenger's arrival. However, according to those still in the *Standard* offices, the reality is that it was actually a street billboard to blame for one of the most fondly remembered parts of the story as Arsenal finally got their man.

The *Evening Standard* ran an amusing piece on 18 September 1996, which, while highlighting how much of an unknown Wenger was when he arrived, was further evidence of just how insular English football was at the time. The article asked: 'How should the name be pronounced – both of them? If you are French, you will probably address him as Ar-senn Won-jair. German? Ar-sehn Ven-ger, perhaps. North Bank regular, plasterer Trevor Hale, struggled slightly: "Arse-in Won-gah, innit mate?"'

Chairman Hill-Wood, for all his Old Etonian bluster, was a high-flying banker. He flew to Japan to talk to Wenger and the deal was done.

I liked Arsene very much from the moment I met him. He was very intelligent and personable and good fun as well, with a fine sense of humour.

Later, we went to see him in Japan and tried to persuade him to leave Grampus Eight a little early. He said he wasn't prepared to do that and I said I wouldn't try to persuade him. What he said was he'd tell Grampus Eight that he'd try to find them a replacement so they might let him go a little early. That's just what he did and joined us about three or four months later.

I did mention to him that we had some fairly rough diamonds and asked him if he'd have a problem handling them. He said he didn't think he would because he'd had Jurgen Klinsmann and Glenn Hoddle at Monaco and he didn't have any trouble with them, even though they were quite difficult characters.

'Rough diamonds' was perhaps putting it mildly. Wenger inherited a dressing room with a drinking culture, big egos, strong characters and players who had proved difficult to control. In fact, Arsenal probably had some of the most renowned hard drinkers in English football. They were dubbed 'the Tuesday Club' because several of them would meet after training on a Tuesday and go on a drinking binge that could often last until the early hours of Thursday, if they had Wednesday off. New signings would face an initiation process and somehow play on the Saturday. Tony Adams had very recently admitted to being an alcoholic, Paul Merson had previously confessed to drink and drug problems and gone into rehab, and there were countless other examples of drinking incidents that had embarrassed the club.

Former manager George Graham had not eradicated the drinking problem and the players were big, loud and vociferous characters. Although they had respected Graham, some had mocked Rioch, and now they were being asked to embrace an unknown Frenchman.

John Hartson, a centre forward signed by Graham, who, by his own admission, enjoyed the big nights out, says Wenger was remarkable in the way he transformed the players, won the fans over and laid down the law.

It was very different. George was a fantastic manager, a Double-winning player, a successful manager – he won so much for Arsenal. He had the crowd behind him. The players were basically doing what they wanted to do in the afternoons. If they wanted to have a few beers then they could. If they wanted an 'all-dayer' then they could.

Everyone was drinking under George. I thought it was great! On the day that I signed, Merse had just come out of the Priory. I thought I'd missed all of the fun! But people were still at it. Merse was on top of his problems; he'd have a counsellor with him every day. Tony was trying to change his life around. But it was just a party when I first arrived. If you wanted to go out in the afternoon, there was always someone to go out with. It was very much old school.

Wenger got it through to players that that is not the way to live your life, it's not the way if you want to extend your career. If you

look at Bouldy, Ray Parlour and, in particular, Tony Adams, they would have been finished and washed up at 32. They trained hard but they partied hard as well. Under Wenger, he wasn't having any of that.

It was both a massive gamble and a remarkable show of faith by the Arsenal board to bring in Wenger and, furthermore, the appointment seemed to drag on because, having announced him as their new manager, he did not start officially for the best part of two weeks.

Wenger moved into a house in Totteridge, a leafy area of north London, near to the Deins. He recalls his first trip to Highbury, when he travelled by Tube and went unrecognised throughout the journey because so few people – even Arsenal fans – knew who he was or what he looked like.

‘You know what? I have taken the Tube once, as Arsenal manager,’ said Wenger. ‘When I arrived, Pat Rice told me to go to Potters Bar and take the Tube to go to Highbury. So I took the Tube – at the time nobody knew me. I sat there. It was when I arrived the first week. But it changed quickly.’

In actual fact, there's no Tube station at Potters Bar, but you can get the train and change onto the London Underground further up the line. Cockfosters is like a little village; it has a few cafes where Arsenal's young players hang out, one of the bigger football agency offices is there and many staff live there or thereabouts. It's sleepy, expensive, has big houses and is perfect for the football fraternity.

For most of the players, their first recollection of coming into contact with Wenger was when he watched Arsenal's UEFA Cup tie on Wednesday 25 September with Borussia Monchengladbach from the stands and then promptly came down to the dressing room at half-time to try to make a couple of tactical changes, then sat on the bench for the second half.

As Nigel Winterburn recalled: ‘We just didn't know what to expect. My overriding thoughts and memories of it were that everybody was talking about “Arsene who?” – who was he, would he be a good appointment? My first recollection was from that European game. We were told that he was coming to the game but would just watch, wasn't going to be involved. But he came down at half-time and rearranged the team.’

Wenger's intervention didn't work. Arsenal lost to Borussia Monchengladbach and went out of the UEFA Cup 6-4 on aggregate. He will no doubt be thankful that the record books show he didn't take over until a few weeks later. Interestingly, Tony Adams has said on several occasions that he didn't appreciate Wenger coming into the dressing room then, didn't like his tactical changes, and perhaps that explains why Adams was cautious about him when he took over officially.

But Wenger was already working behind the scenes, even before he was free from his Grampus Eight contract to officially take up his job with Arsenal. In came Patrick Vieira, a lanky, leggy, yet tough French midfielder, who was plucked from AC Milan's reserves for next to nothing. Vieira's quality quickly impressed his new team-mates and that, in itself, had a reassuring impact: some of the players realised that Wenger, despite looking like a geography teacher, was extremely knowledgeable.

But the first meeting with the players was the all-important one. That is when lasting impressions are formed. Mess it up and you can be done for.

Arsenal, partly thanks to Wenger's own input, now have a state-of-the-art training ground. But when he first arrived, Arsenal shared their training ground with University College, London.

It was basic to say the least. When you came in from the big car park, there was a canteen in front of you and some changing rooms, but not much else; you'd walk into the main building and the treatment table was immediately to your right. As a young reporter, I'd stand there nervously – given regular access afforded to very few because I worked for the local paper and club programme – waiting for players to come through. It was loud, intimidating and tough. That old-school football atmosphere was hard to crack. Graham ruled it with an iron fist and commanded respect that way. The whole place went quiet when he walked by. It was an unforgiving atmosphere; there was no room for

weakness or soft characters, which is why Wenger knew he had to make an immediate impression.

A through-door from the dressing rooms led to the immaculate pitches. Before you reached them, there was a small patch of grass with old, creaky wooden benches, two porcelain sinks surrounded by boot-cleaning brushes – where the youth teamers used to polish the first teamers' boots – and a little bit of raised ground which had, in recent years, been the stage for some of English football's biggest dramas.

It was there that Graham had to tell the players that he had been sacked after the bung scandal. For a man as proud as Graham it was humiliating, and the players were stunned as Graham simply thanked them for their efforts and said goodbye. Both Merson and Adams had chosen that spot to admit to their demons.

But, back on a sunny morning in September 1996, Arsenal's players were about to go out for a training session under the supervision of assistant boss Rice when Wenger, on his first proper day at Colney, announced that he wanted to hold a players' meeting to introduce himself. Wenger went smart casual, studious-looking in his glasses, leather elbow patches on his jacket. Yet he had an assured look on his face: his confidence and self-belief were all-important.

To this day, I've only ever seen Wenger in either a suit or a tracksuit – apart from one time. He turned up in beige chinos, a brown shirt and brown casual shoes. No doubt expensively assembled but he looked straight out of a Next catalogue. Wenger had been caught short. He'd clearly forgotten about a press conference; a press officer had called and reminded him, and he turned up the best part of two hours late. For any journalist who knows Wenger and goes to his press conferences, this is far from unusual. But it wasn't about keeping the press waiting – he'd just forgotten.

Back in 1996, Wenger's outfit did not stand out from the crowd and yet in a football environment it looked unusual as he set about his introductory speech to the Arsenal dressing room. He was strong, clear in his message and impressive. His English by then was excellent, doubtless improved through his friendship with Dein, and yet his accent and nationality still meant the naughty boys at the back were trying to contain the odd giggle as he spoke. A few started doing Inspector Clouseau impressions under their breath behind their hands.

Wenger spoke about his desire for a 'culture of change' at the club. He told them he wanted to play 'attractive football, to win with style'. He assured them he wanted to take on the good points within the existing squad – the team spirit, togetherness and strength – and build on it to bring success back to Arsenal. Wenger also spelt out to the players that he would look to change training methods, to improve them as players, and he mentioned wanting to work on their diets, too.

His opening address lasted about 15 minutes, and the players who listened that day remember being impressed, as he announced he would tailor training to the individual and everyone would be given a chance. Wenger had something to say and the squad paid attention. He said he would be honest and, if the players trusted him, then he could bring them success.

Some of the players joked that Wenger was more like a teacher than a football manager, and it was clear that not all had been won over as many laughed at the end of his speech, still not sure he had the experience required for the job.

John Hartson was there and says: 'Arsene was and remains different class. He's the full package. He could talk in front of 500 people at the Savoy at a black-tie event. Then do exactly the same for big-ego players. What impressed us was that he'd done his research. It felt like he knew about all of us. At first, we were thinking: "What does this professor-looking guy know about football?" But I tell you something, he had the inside track on every single one of us.'

Midfielder Stephen Hughes recalls that day as well:

All the boys were getting out of their cars in the car park, saying: 'Who's this geezer?' I remember it very clearly, and he used to lil

to tell you what you would be doing in training that day, whereas George and Bruce would tell us to go and do a warm-up, run round the fields, then come back and we'll do the training. But Wenger would say: 'Right, we're doing this, doing this and then we're doing this.'

I remember us being nervous about it because no one was sure where we were going to go, what we were going to do as a club. I remember thinking his English was very good. He had all these eyes on him; he'd never admit it, but I think he was a touch nervous too. I sat there thinking: 'His English is incredible. This geezer is incredible.'

Within a week, almost all had been converted – largely because of his training methods. They could see and feel a difference quite quickly.

Wenger's first training session was so different to what the players had been used to under Graham Taylor and Rioch – who were all about set pieces followed by small-sided games to finish off with – that many remember it vividly. 'What on earth is going on here?' they thought, as out came 30 mats which were placed on the floor. They had been used to standing stretches, touching your toes to stretch hamstrings and pulling up your leg to stretch thighs. Now, suddenly, Wenger wanted all of the players to lie flat on their backs, then bring up their knees and swivel their legs to do hip flexes.

Wenger also introduced plyometrics: sticks were placed across two cones and the players had to jump over; they did step-ups on to benches, lunges, ran in and out of poles. He really wanted to make the players move, increase their speed and power. Training was radically different; it was short, sharp and precise and always to the second, governed by Wenger – with a stopwatch around his neck. He would often stand over players, and if they weren't doing the stretches right, then he would get them to do it again.

One of the biggest characters in that dressing room was Ray Parlour, who recalls those early days and the difference that Wenger made on the group.

We didn't have a clue who he was. We were asking: 'Can he be successful here?' It was a bit of a gamble. We trusted David Dein because he loved the club, wanted the best for the club and went to every youth-team game, reserves, everything. It was David Dein who said: 'This guy will take us forward.'

His focus was the thing that struck me straightaway. He always looked to me as if he was very excited to work in the English league. He'd worked in France, Japan, but the English league was different for him and he was excited about challenging the likes of Manchester United. He knew he had a strong back four with David Seaman and a few others. Great players elsewhere, with Dennis Bergkamp who was there already.

From day one, he certainly had that focus and on the training pitch he was fantastic. We took balls out. Straightaway, it was about getting the ball on the floor, pass and move. No disrespect to other managers, but we probably as English players didn't work on that enough. It was an eye-opener for us as to how we needed to go forward in the future . . . He gave everyone a chance. Arsene stood there with his stopwatch and observed. That stopwatch changed everything – it made it interesting. He looked at everything you were doing . . .

He definitely developed my game so much. He gave me so much belief. Technically, I did lots more training with him. The training was so enjoyable that we'd stay behind and practise. Everything was just right. Everybody was at a good age. We wanted to improve for different reasons as quickly as possible. Suddenly, we had the platform to do that.

The foreign players he brought in were fantastic, like Vieira and Overmars. They were world class and made you a better player, there's no doubt. We loved the training. We'd have a practice even before he came out. He knew that. The sessions that he put on were amazing. The freedom he gave us was incredible. He'd want us to express ourselves; he wouldn't want us to complicate it. He said: 'Look, you all know your jobs, we've worked hard in training, let's go out and play.'

Veteran left back Nigel Winterburn, part of Arsenal's famous back four, was even more glowing about the complete sea change in training methods.

Within the first week, I loved the training sessions. They were short, sharp and intense. For example, in pre-season, we'd been used to lots of running, a hard slog, but he'd introduce a ball. He'd put you into your position, then he'd get you running up and down the line but then deliver the ball into the centre forward. He'd get you to do that five or six times and then recover. You'd then rest while the right back goes. Then he'd work with the midfield. Then you'd go again.

Yes, we'd run without the ball, but even that was on a stopwatch. What he'd do with the older players, the likes of Steve Bould, Lee Dixon, he'd give them an extra second on the run. Two or three seconds longer for recovery. It was fascinating to be a part of it. We'd get our base fitness. The younger guys, like Ray Parlour and so on, would work harder and get less time. Then we'd do the plyometrics part of the training – jumping through hoops, jumping over the hurdles. I'd never done this stuff before.

In pre-season back then, it was for hard running and hard work. Double sessions most days and running. But with Arsene, it was light jog and a walk! We went in for lunch and thought: 'It's got to be harder this afternoon!' But we got out there and balls were on the pitch. We'd do technical stuff and it was about easing us back into training after six weeks off. It was a completely different approach.

It was impossible, I believe, to be unimpressed with his training methods, the intensity of the training, how meticulous everything was in terms of the training. From my point of view, I bought into it straightaway with Arsene because I just loved the training, the movement of the football, the keeping of the football. He wanted to get everybody moving, everybody moving together, options with the ball, it was intense in training.

I have to admit that I wasn't always the best trainer early on. But Arsene came in, I was a bit older, there were a few rumours about him wanting to get rid of the back four and my mentality changed towards training; the intensity suited me. It was short, it was sharp. . . With the results that we started to get with the style of football, I think most players really, really enjoyed it. To be quite honest, I can't see a way that you wouldn't enjoy it.

Stephen Hughes said: 'What stuck out at first was that he would send us out on the pitch with a ball each, and Dicko [Lee Dixon] was saying: "What's all this about?" We were all going across the pitches, doing Cruyff turns, and I remember Tony Adams going: "I haven't done a Cruyff turn for three years!" Even Boro [Primorac] was doing Cruyff turns and we were giggling like schoolboys.'

Wenger also introduced mannequins in training. He would lay them out in a formation, a 4-4-2 for example, then get the players to play around them. Often it would be a midfielder, full back, winger and centre forward who would be asked to do drills. They'd pass the ball in the middle, lay it out wide back inside and out wide before the winger would hit a cross for the striker. It may sound an odd exercise, but it was done over and over again as Wenger tried to paint pictures in the players' minds. Next time they were in a similar situation in a match, they'd 'switch' the play, knowing where a team mate would be.

Wenger felt the team he inherited was too regimented. He wanted the players to play with freedom but, at the same time, also to have potential moves in their minds. He sought to improve them technically, with fewer straight lines and more movement, and he believed the mannequins helped that.

He also wanted to get the players dribbling better, swerving and keeping the ball under closer control. Passing drills, players working in small triangles, passing the ball into areas where players were supposed to run into – these exercises were intended not only to improve them technically but also to increase their speed of thought. The players were meant to be on the move more physically and mentally. Gone were the days of hitting the ball long and into channels; Wenger worked in training more on ball retention and passing. The full backs, in particular, became instrumental in sessions, always making themselves available to receive the ball from the goalkeeper, who was urged to roll or kick it short rather than take a long punt forward.

In another drill, the players would form a circle with one player in the middle. The ball was fired in to him, he'd have to control it and pass it on. It was all done at top speed; the manager would be watching and the players really felt under pressure, but it certainly improved their touch and their technical ability.

Wenger would work with individual players as well. While Pat Rice and Boro Primorac took over the training, the manager would be very hands-on. For example, one session saw two wingers put over crosses for centre forward John Hartson to work on his finishing. All the time, Wenger was standing next to Hartson, telling him how to work and improve on his movement to lose a defender or to get ready for the cross.

Despite the improvements he made, the joke among the players was that Wenger was 'pretty rubbish' as a player from the few odd occasions he joined in or tried to have a kick about while waiting for training to start. And it would be wrong to say that the players didn't question some of Wenger's methods. Back in those early days, Tony Adams – nicknamed Rodders after the *Only Fools and Horses* character – even went to see Wenger to complain that they were not doing enough in

training to get them fully fit.

Hughes recalls how Wenger responded: ‘We’d always end up finishing with a game of eight versus eights. He was the first manager to really talk about short and sharp sessions . . . But he’d tell us: “Don’t worry. We’ll get stronger for the second half of the season.”’

The other big change was in the players’ diet. Wenger banned tomato ketchup and Ian Wright complained there was broccoli with everything. The quick transformation into a healthy, bland and very regimented diet came as a culture shock for some of the players, as Nigel Winterburn recalled:

Rehydration was so different: Drinking water. We got a new chef in. It was fish, grilled, boiled chicken and all the spices were taken out. Until 6.30 p.m. after games, the players’ lounge was alcohol free. That was very important to him – refuelling straight after games. I loved a bit of chocolate, but Arsene would look to control everything. He’d like to travel on the train. He’d look down the carriage and see what you were doing. You’d have to be sure before having a cup of tea. ‘OK, you can have a cup of tea – but no sugar.’

When we were waiting on the platform for a train and he wasn’t looking we’d pile into the kiosk and get bags of crisps. I’m sure I knew exactly what was going on but we were performing for him.

John Hartson also remembers the new dietary regime: ‘He changed all the methods. I didn’t know much about the diet side of things. I’d come from Luton [where] there were old-school players . . . who never really looked after their diets. Their diet was a gammon steak, egg and chips plus a pint of squash. But after I went to Arsenal, Arsene Wenger changed all that. We ate together; we all had to finish before we could leave the table. It was all chicken and rice. Pasta on a Friday night. There was steaks, fish, really good food and we were really spoilt.’

Of course, there had to be trust when it came to the players eating at home or even on away trips, and Wenger quickly had to introduce new rules after some players tested his patience. He banned room service on away trips and even ordered hotels to inform him if a player tried it on. Stephen Hughes recalls those early days and Wenger’s new rules.

We were all gutted about the ketchup going. We were all trying to sneak it in. Big Johnny Hartson was a great lad. We’d have dinner away from home, and we’d knock on his door and he’d be having a pint of Coke, a club sandwich, and two hours later he’d leave all the plates outside of his room!

That didn’t last long. I remember how he policed it – he pulled us all together and told us to stop room service and then stopped the hotel from giving us any extras. He’d tell the hotel to tell him and he’d pull whoever and say: ‘Why did you try to order room service and a pint of Fanta?’

Wenger banned carbonated water at the training ground, because he claimed the fizz in the water restricted oxygen flow, as well as milk and sugar in tea and coffee, saying it was a ‘disgusting English habit’. He relented slightly on that rule in later years, but told the players they must make sure the sugar in their hot drinks was distributed evenly.

While being interviewed at the training ground a few years after Wenger took charge, Sol Campbell sat down with a cup of coffee, glanced around to see if anyone was looking and then put some sugar on his spoon. He took remarkable care when putting sugar in his coffee; putting sugar on his spoon, he then put the spoon in the coffee and moved it from left to right until the sugar had dissolved evenly.

Campbell explained that Wenger had said: ‘If you must have sugar in your tea or coffee you have to distribute the granules evenly in your coffee so it’s absorbed evenly.’ According to Wenger, that ensures it’s also absorbed in an even flow in the body’s system, and thus keeps energy levels stable rather than giving a sugar rush.

Diet is so clearly important to Wenger and is something he learned in Japan. Even now, he makes a point of following the players’ diets. ‘I think in England you eat too much sugar and meat and not enough vegetables. I lived for two years in Japan and it was the best diet I ever had. The whole way of life there is linked to health. Their diet is basically boiled vegetables, fish and rice. No fat, no sugar.

You notice when you live there that there are no fat people. What's really dreadful is the diet in Britain. ~~The whole day you drink tea with milk and coffee with milk and cakes. If you had a fantasy world of what you shouldn't eat in sport, it's what you eat here.~~'

Within the first couple of weeks, a nutritionist came to the training ground, gave a speech to the players and handed out leaflets on what to eat and what not to eat. Communication was a big thing for Wenger. Those early days were crucial for him to get – and keep – the big characters onside. Wenger could often be seen walking around the fields of the training ground with Tony Adams or Paul Merson, two players who needed a lot of support at the time, and Wenger's 'long walks' with them were a regular routine early on.

A further big change was the pre-match routine for home games. During the George Graham era, the players would gather at the South Herts Golf Club in Totteridge, north London, have a team meeting and then drive in convoy to Highbury. Under Bruce Rioch, the players would actually eat at home – most having beans or omelettes for breakfast – and then drive themselves to the ground and meet there.

Now Wenger insisted on them meeting beforehand (at first at the training ground and later it became a hotel, where they would stay the night before a match, even a home game) and eating a very strict diet up to five hours before kick-off. It would consist of mashed potato, vegetables and boiled chicken. Sometimes, the players would be desperately trying to force down a full meal at 10 a.m.

Under Rioch, the only pick-me-ups were jelly babies left in the dressing room. That also changed under Wenger. The players were put on the supplement creatine, which is supposed to boost energy and muscle strength. It is a legal supplement even if it has caused controversy down the years. Arsenal eventually stopped using it because it gave too many players upset stomachs. On top of that came energy-boosting supplements that looked like sugar cubes. The players used to joke that the physio, Gary Lewin, had become the dealer and that they were all on drugs. Players knew if they were in the first-team squad, because they were the ones to receive the supplements. Winterburn recalls:

The supplements that were there were never forced on anybody, so you didn't have to take them. I didn't take any of them, I have to admit. Everything was laid out in front of you; you were given a brief description of what they were for. But I had a set way and, with my stomach, I didn't eat lots before games anyway.

[The new diet] didn't really change, if I'm quite honest, my outlook or my perception of whether it helped me a lot. I went along with it because that's what you do if you're playing for a team. If the food is put there to be eaten then you go along with it. I didn't like cooked food at lunchtime. Sometimes when Arsene wasn't around I had a sandwich. I had to make sure he wasn't looking and hope the chef didn't notice or I'd get into trouble!

The supplements you either take or you don't. A lot of the guys took it. You just got on with it. But as I've said before, that's the ingredients that are put there to try and help you. But the most important thing is what you produce in ninety minutes of football. In my opinion, it doesn't matter if someone is eating a hamburger, because if they're producing for you every single week then so be it. They can eat what they want, as far as I'm concerned.

Stephen Hughes added:

A few of the guys got into [taking supplements], gave it a go. I was always with Martin Keown and I remember him saying: 'Hughesy, I've got to be careful – I don't want to be too strong.' He'd take it and after three minutes he'd be saying: 'I'm feeling better already.' Some of it, I'm sure, was psychological.

I remember putting on a bit of weight because of it and the boss saying: 'Hughesy, are you eating takeaways?' I said: 'No, I think it might be that creatine.' He said: 'Are you taking that? You come off it.' He watched whoever took it, studied it all; some of the guys liked it.

You could definitely see a difference in the players. Everyone was fitter, sharper and crisper. Not only would Lewin come round with little tubs of creatine, but he was also responsible for booking massages, which also became a key feature of Wenger's new philosophy. Suddenly, old-school players wanted daily massages. Lewin would have to warn off players as massages became more and more

popular. ‘Well, you might have to wait an hour, there’s a big queue.’

Parlour recalled the rapid changes in match-day routine and diet at the training ground: ‘There was no sugar at the training ground, only water with lunch. You’d have a three-course meal at 11.30 a.m.; you’d feel a bit hungry before the game. If you had sugar before the game, your level would go up and down and that’s something he’d try to avoid. But at half-time, he’d come round with sugar cubes. Then water again at half-time. There was a little livener on the sugar cube – I don’t know what it was.’

Hartson highlights the revolutionary impact all of these changes had on English football at the time: ‘He changed it with diet, the way he treated and spoke to the players. He made us stretch before games, after games, after and before every training session. English football has so much to thank him for, he really did change the face of so many things – training, preparation and the way the game was played. It was incredible.’

Players embrace change a lot easier when you can see results on the pitch. But Wenger recalls those difficult early days with amusement. He felt everything was against him – there was scepticism among the players, fans and the media – and, rather like most managers, he enjoyed proving people wrong. ‘People were asking who I was. I was a complete unknown. And there was no history of a foreign manager succeeding in England. So I was in a situation where no one knew me and history was against me.’

‘There were some amusing details. I changed a few habits [of the players], which isn’t easy in a team where the average age is thirty years. At the first match the players were chanting, “We want our Mars bars back!” So there were some fun things. At halftime in the first game I asked my physio Gary Lewin: “Nobody is talking, what’s wrong with them?”, and he replied: “They’re hungry.” I hadn’t given them their chocolate before the game. It was funny.’

Wenger’s first game in charge was at Blackburn Rovers and the squad stayed in a hotel near Ewood Park. He sent round a message to all the players to assemble in the hotel’s ballroom, but it still came as a shock to them when he tried to introduce some yoga, basic pilates moves and stretches. This was 1996 and, for at least another five years, it was still deemed a story in the newspapers if a player was brave enough to admit using yoga to help their movement. It received a mixed response from the players: David Platt, in particular, hated it while Steve Bould credits the stretching with prolonging his playing career by another two years.

Winterburn remembers that first stretching session in the ballroom at Blackburn.

He did it wherever he could. Wherever there was a spare room, we just went in. It didn’t matter what sort of room it was. Sometimes it was a massively open place, sometimes quite cramped, and you’d not have a lot of room to manoeuvre. He didn’t mind where it was, it was just part of the warm-up ritual that he’d like to do. We would do it every single game without fail.

We used to get up on a match day, go for a walk. We used to go into a room, do the different sorts of stretches, do some pilates-style stretches, legs up the wall and so on. I think the idea was to stretch the body back out again . . . I didn’t see any reason why that wouldn’t help me and the rest of the team, so you go along and you do that . . . I’m assuming they probably still do it. The morning of the game, there was a set time to meet; we would meet, walk – a quick walk just for ten or fifteen minutes – go back into a room, do these stretches and then have our pre-match meal. That was pretty much the same routine during the time I was there.

Hughes recalls how the English players in particular struggled to take it seriously at first: ‘The stretching was the weirdest thing in the world. When we all first walked in, it was legs up on the wall. All the English lads were farting and burping and the gaffer didn’t like all that. He saw it as a time to get your mind right; it took a while . . . and then it became sort of normal.’

Wenger also wanted to bring in stretches at 8 a.m. on the morning of an evening game. It took Tony Adams, the club captain and unofficial shop steward, to lead a protest and it was then altered to a pre-match walk on the morning of the game.

That first game was at Blackburn on 12 October 1996. Arsenal didn’t play particularly well. In fact Ian Wright scored early on, but Blackburn went on to be the better team and were unlucky to still be

behind at half time. The Arsenal players went into the dressing room, expecting the worst. They feared Wenger would immediately tear into them. The opposite happened.

According to one of the players in the dressing room, it was a full eight minutes before Wenger spoke. Even Rice, by all accounts, found Wenger's silence unnerving, but it had a calming effect. Arsenal went out for the second half, Wright got another goal shortly after the restart and Arsenal won the game 2-0. The Wenger legend, the Wenger effect and the Wenger story had begun.

Hartson, who played in that first game, recalls:

It's funny because he never really got involved that much. He was on the team bus, he sat in the crowd; it felt like he popped his head into the dressing room more than giving a big team talk.

It was a great day for me – I absolutely smashed Henning Berg all over the pitch! I remember winning a header for the first, Wrighty scored both goals. I think I made the first one . . . I was aggressive. I was 21 years of age and he probably thought I was fiery, red-haired, a bit raw, and I think he quite liked that. Throughout his career, he's always enjoyed playing with a big man up front.

He came in after the game. He told us it was a great performance and that he was looking forward to working with us all. Then he really went to work with us on the training ground from the following Monday. I really enjoyed that first game and the training.

Still today, Wenger often says nothing even after the heaviest or most demoralising of defeats. He would rather sit back, digest, collect his thoughts, and then have a debrief at the training ground. Dressing-room etiquette is something that Wenger clearly thinks deeply about and, in particular, a manager's conduct, his behaviour towards the players, how best to motivate or lift them.

'I have been aggressive at half-time, yes, but you have to adapt to the culture of your team,' said Wenger. 'When you go to Japan, you have to be cautious, because what looks normal in an English dressing room suddenly looks completely shocking in a Japanese dressing room.'

There have been countless stories of dressing-room bust-ups over the years, when a manager has let rip. Probably the most famous incident of all was when Sir Alex Ferguson kicked a boot in anger and it hit David Beckham on the head, requiring stitches. You could never imagine that from Wenger, no matter how angry he was.

Wenger did adapt to a different culture in England and, slowly, the dressing room adapted to him as well as recognising the change in the way the manager treated them. He preserved some traditions – allowing the players to keep their music blaring out in the dressing room before games when everything else concerning the inner sanctum was about calmness and serenity – and modified other routines.

Wenger's lack of rollickings can even unnerve players. Real dressing-room shouting matches can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. That is how Wenger is: in the main, calm and collected. It's his way, his method and his philosophy. He has lost his temper in press conferences, but not often. He's lost it with staff in front of the media on occasion – mostly after a defeat away from home in Europe when he's rushing to get away from the stadium and on to the bus to catch the plane home. He gets most uptight and stressed about travel arrangements, and has even been known to chase Paul Johnson, the club's long-serving employee now in charge of first-team travel, off a team bus to try to sort out a roadblock that was obstructing Arsenal's route to the train station to get home. Wenger could be seen banging the desk in anger while Johnson desperately tried – and eventually succeeded – to clear a traffic jam on a bridge. Wenger's early days at Arsenal certainly proved he was very different as a manager.

His style, ideas and methods – so different from anything that had gone before – were ushering in a new era. Arsenal's philosophy was being revolutionised in training, on the pitch and in the dressing room.

FRENCH REVOLUTION

‘I THOUGHT AT FIRST: “What does this Frenchman know about football?” He wears glasses, does he even speak English?’ These were the cutting words of Tony Adams, Arsenal’s legendary captain. He was highly sceptical of Arsene Wenger when he first took over. Adams was a brilliant but very English centre half, set in his ways, loud and strong-willed. He was also seen as the shop steward of the dressing room. Adams had often been sent in to see the manager to try to renegotiate contracts for the squad during the George Graham years.

Graham was perceived as being notoriously tight on contracts during his reign, to such a point that Martin Keown, who grew up at Highbury, left for Aston Villa in 1986 in a dispute over £50 a week. Arsenal ended up having to buy him back, via Everton, in 1993 for £2 million. It made no economic sense but that was typical of Graham: he’d haggle over every penny.

The joke among the players was that Adams would go in to see Graham, promising to stand firm and to get them all pay rises. Then he’d emerge from the manager’s office soon after with a healthy rise for himself but not as much for everyone else. While much of it was just dressing-room banter, there was a genuine feeling at the club that the players were hard done by and were not being paid the going rate. Adams tried and failed to convince Graham to give the squad better contracts.

So, the first and perhaps best thing that Wenger did to get the players onside was to improve their contracts immediately. In fact, some members of Arsenal’s famous back four even had their pay doubled overnight. Wenger was genuinely shocked at the pay level some of the mainstays of his team were on. He went through the contracts and straightaway insisted to David Dein, the club’s vice-chairman who had brought him to Highbury, that the players’ pay must be brought up to speed.

Just imagine how the squad must have reacted. One day they’re feeling hard done by, under-appreciated despite winning trophies for the club, and the next the new manager has changed it all. If there was one quick and easy way to get the players onside then Wenger had found it. In fact, in the feel-good mood about the place, some players got better deals than they could ever have hoped for. Dennis Bergkamp and Tony Adams were called in to be given new deals after everyone else had been sorted out. When word got round that the two top earners – and arguably the most important players at the club had been given new pay rises, a delegation of players went back to see Wenger to ask for another rise as they were already well behind their team-mates. Nigel Winterburn recalls:

I think the contracts changed very quickly. To be fair, they changed radically under Bruce Rioch. Bruce was only there for a year so you don’t know if that progression is going to continue. But, under Arsene, he assessed very, very quickly that the wages weren’t good enough for what he was trying to achieve for the team. They changed very, very quickly. It’s always the same. You never really know but I was always under the impression that there was an A, B and C level for the players. He tried to keep a realistic gap between the three.

The older players – myself, Lee Dixon and Steve Bould – used to get one-year contracts. We’d negotiated with him that he would tell us in February [if our contract would be renewed]. We had great belief that, with the team we had, we would still be playing in the team, and come February if we were challenging for a title or going for a cup then he’d be unlikely to tell you at that stage of the

season they weren't going to give you a new contract . . .

He was a man of his word. I remember one year, we'd gone in and he'd given us all new contracts, because he said he wanted to bring us up closer to the top players like Tony Adams, Patrick Vieira, Dennis Bergkamp . . . Then Tony came in a week later and said: 'I've signed a new contract.' Bouldy, myself and Lee said that put us back where we were last week.

I said to the other lads: 'Shall I go and see him?' I went in and said: 'I'm obviously happy with the new contract, but you've just put all the other players' contracts up so we're back where we were.' He then said to leave it with him. I went back out to Lee and Bouldy and told them that I thought I'd been fobbed off there. But a couple of days later, he came back and said that they'd have to ratify it with the league but promised to give us exactly the same amount of rise that he'd given us the previous week at the end of the season. But he said he'd have to give us it as a lump sum.

It was absolutely incredible. I've never known anything like it. I would trust him because he's a man of his word. We had nothing written down on a piece of paper, we had our official contracts from the week before but then, come May or June, in one of those pay packets we got the extra money which was attached with a signed form which was ratified by the league. That was absolutely amazing. He's a man of his word, that's for sure. I think that's how and why he kept the unity within the team and among the players.

Despite the perception that Wenger is cautious when it comes to transfers, he always endeavours to look after and reward players because he recognises that if he looks after the players financially they would look after him. Former Arsenal striker John Hartson said: 'He gave the players great contracts, gave them new deals, gave them extensions, more money, and they did the business for him. They won him titles. They were loyal to him and they repaid his faith. He is very loyal to players. Players respond to that. He wants to reward them. It's a real big part of his philosophy.'

Wenger compares his philosophy to a 'socialist model', which provoked laughter from several reporters when he said it in a press conference. Millionaire footballers are hardly associated with socialist principles. But the point is that Wenger tried to keep every player within a similar pay bracket, so as to avoid resentment in the dressing room. If one player in a team were paid ten times more than a team-mate, that, Wenger argued, would create tension and destroy dressing-room spirit.

'We pay well. We pay very well,' Wenger said. 'I've spent all my life making sure people who work for us are paid well and I believe if you can do it, you do it. [We should look] to pay something that makes sense and is defensible in front of every single player. We make exceptions sometimes but they are not maybe so high. If you want to keep making profit you have to respect that. I don't know how it works at other [clubs]. But it's not only me; it's in co-operation with the board. When we want to go "far", I ask for the authorisation of the board. But we have a more socialist model.'

Wenger has a love of politics, but claims that neither communism nor capitalism works in society, let alone football. But he justifies paying high salaries because 'exceptional talent' should be rewarded. Maybe he squares this off with his own salary, which has always been among the best in the Premier League.

'Politically, I am for efficiency. Economically first. Until the 1980s the world was divided into two – people were either communist or capitalist. The communist model does not work economically, we all realised that, but the capitalist model in the modern world also looks to be unsustainable. You cannot ignore individual interests, but I believe the world evolves slowly. The last 30 years have brought a minimum amount of money for everybody in the West; the next step, politically, would be the maximum amount of money earned by everybody.'

Winterburn appreciated how he was treated but also believes that Wenger's loyalty to the players and keeping his promises can sometimes end up undermining the overall strength of the squad:

When I left in 2000, I had been offered a new deal. I spoke with David Dein in his office with Arsene. When Arsene left me out of the team in the December of the previous season, he said to me after a couple of weeks: 'I know you're unhappy, you've played your career playing every week, but I want you to be part of the squad.' But I got to the end of that season and decided my performance was dropping a little and it was a case of leave or retire, really.

I thought I might get another year, but I felt if I was playing only once every four or five weeks then that wouldn't be good for me. I wanted to push myself to my limit so I told him I wanted to leave and I had a discussion with David Dein. David actually offered me a new contract which was for more money than I was on. But I told David it wasn't about money, I just wanted to play football and when I left the meeting, Arsene Wenger put his arm around me and said: 'Don't worry, I'll make sure it happens for you.'

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